

## PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

### Developing Oral Communicative Competence among English Majors at the Intermediate Level

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Oral communicative competence is important for ESL learners. It is one of the most necessary language skills for displaying their language proficiency. It is especially so with English majors. The ultimate aim of oral English teaching should be the acquisition of oral communicative competence, i.e., the ability to speak appropriately.

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* (Richards et al. 1985), communicative competence includes:

1. knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language;
2. knowledge of the rules of speaking (knowing how to begin and end conversations, what topics may be talked about in different types of speech events, which address forms should be used with different persons in different situations, etc.);
3. knowing how to use and respond to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations; and
4. knowing how to use language appropriately.

These ideas have had a great influence on English teaching in China. In our national syllabus for English majors in colleges and universities, to speak appropriately is the ultimate aim of oral class. After four years of training, our students should know what to say and how to say it to the right person at the right time, without causing misunderstanding.

#### Problems in oral communication

Establishing an aim is one thing; having it realized is quite another. Before their enrollment into colleges and universities, our learners studied English for at least six years. They have a general knowledge of English grammar and a vocabulary of 2500 to 3500 words. But most of them have difficulties in oral communication. Their main problems are as follows:

**1. English words in Chinese sentence structures.** Children begin to learn a foreign language at the age of 12 or 13 in China. Their mother tongue heavily affects their foreign-language learning. They make up a sentence to express themselves, first in Chinese, and then translate it word for word into English. It is not strange that native speakers find it hard to communicate with them. Here are some examples:

- \* I think I don't like your shirt.
- \* Are you going to marry with him?
- \* I wish you work smoothly, live happily.

**2. Lack of understanding of the target culture.** People in different cultures have different values concerning the same things as is shown in the following dialogues:

- (1)  
Mr. Brown: Your English is very good.  
Miss Wang: No, no. My English is very poor. I still have a long way to go.
- (2)  
Li Ming: You are putting on weight recently, aren't you?  
Miss Green: It's none of your business.
- (3)  
Student: Are you going to the cinema, Prof. Smith?  
Prof. Smith: Yes. But why do you ask if you know I'm going?

**3. Lack of conversational competence.** Learners don't know what to say and when to say it in a certain context. They are at a loss as to what to say to start a conversation naturally. Sometimes they are too formal, and sometimes they are too informal, or too abrupt. The more fluent their English is, the less likely they will be forgiven when they speak inappropriately. For instance:

- (1)  
Zhang Hua: (at a party) What's the relationship between you and that man?  
Mary: What do you mean?
- (2)  
Mike phones at Zhang's office.  
Mike: Hello, I'd like to speak to Zhang Dali, please.  
Zhang: I'm Zhang Dali. Who are you?

In the first dialogue, Zhang Hua only wants to know if the man is one of Mary's family members or not, but he failed to put it appropriately. While in the second dialogue, Zhang Dali is answering the telephone in a Chinese way.

To deal with these problems, we use several steps to help our learners acquire the ability to speak appropriately.

#### Developing verbal skills

**1. Word-guessing game** (to speak in correct sentences): It's important to start from a simple point, i.e., to speak correctly in sentences before acquiring oral communicative competence. First, the teacher asks a learner to come to the blackboard and face the rest of the students, and then another learner comes up and writes a word on the blackboard that is familiar to most of the learners. Finally, all the learners try to explain the word in English for the first learner to guess. During the process, the learners try their best to speak the language. They have a good opportunity to practise. Both teachers and learners find it practical, interesting, and fruitful to spend 10–20 minutes every day on this language game.

**2. Description** (to develop the ability to speak with both coherence and cohesion): This exercise aims to train learners to speak in paragraphs, and to be able to make themselves understood.

Describe the following:

- (a) your campus
- (b) one of your close friends
- (c) an auto accident you once witnessed

**3. Topic talking** (argument vs. counter-argument): This exercise helps learners put together a formal presentation. They can first be offered an outline or a few key words. For instance,

#### SMOKING

- A. Argument: key words
  - a. smoking and disease: bronchial troubles, heart disease, lung cancer
  - b. government's policy on smoking
  - c. smoking and advertising
  - d. smoking ban in public places
- B. Counter-argument: key words
  - a. There are still scientists who doubt the smoking/cancer link.
  - b. Smoking has many psychological benefits and makes social contacts easier.

- c. Tobacco is an important source of income for many countries.
- d. People should be free to decide to smoke or not.

Later, learners can be offered other topics for discussion:

GENERATION GAP  
WOMEN'S POSITION IN SOCIETY AND AT HOME  
MONEY AND HAPPINESS  
SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN CHINA  
ADVERTISEMENTS AND SHOPPING

When the students present their arguments/counter-arguments, teachers should be more listeners than correctors of errors. They must be interested in the students' views. Fluency should take priority over correctness. Information is more important than language forms.

### Familiarizing students with the non-linguistic features of the language

**1. Introduce cultural background knowledge.** Background knowledge about the target language is of vital importance to language learners. Different cultures define social situations differently. Although there are many social situations that are common across cultures, there are other practices for which no equivalence exists.

In English, a compliment may be acknowledged with thanks:

A: That was a wonderful meal.

B: Thank you. I'm glad you liked it.

However, in Chinese, the hostess most probably will not acknowledge the compliment verbally, since this may not sound suitably humble:

A: That was a wonderful meal.

B: No, I'm sorry the food is not delicious. Though the host or hostess would be glad to hear the compliment, still it is refused verbally. Native speakers of English may feel puzzled and frustrated at the refusal of their compliment.

In China, when two friends meet, they may ask each other about anything—health, income, prices of private belongings, etc. They do this because they think friendship and intimacy exists between them. But native speakers of English think these topics are private. They may feel offended or hurt being asked about these things.

As we are teaching English in an environment where Chinese is the mother tongue, understanding of the target culture can be realized through (a) introduction of the target culture by teachers in class, and (b) contact with the target

culture through seeing films, watching TV programs, reading (fiction and non-fiction), etc.

**2. Introduce pragmatic knowledge about the target language.** In learning a language, linguistic knowledge is important, but knowing when, where, and how to apply this knowledge to different contexts is more important. Knowing about conversational routines means getting hold of the rope that leads you to natural, casual, and appropriate communication with native speakers.

A: Your pen can write smoothly.

B: Do you like it? I can buy one for you, too.

In this dialogue, B mistakes A's compliment for the implication of wanting the same kind of pen. In Chinese, we often have similar situations. Native speakers of English and Chinese understand illocutionary forces differently. That is why we often hear exchanges such as the following:

Wang: You are not busy, Mr. Smith, I hope?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I'm very busy. I have a lot of work to do.

Here, Mr. Smith, the native speaker, fails to get the illocutionary meaning of the first speaker, which is that he hopes Mr. Smith will help him with something or do him a favour. After hearing Mr. Smith's words, Wang feels hopeless and thinks that perhaps Mr. Smith is unwilling to help.

### Conclusion

Throughout this article I have tried to show that providing information to your learners as to when to speak and what to say in certain contexts is important in successful communication with native speakers. It is as important as the mastery of linguistic knowledge. As everybody knows, it is not always the

player with the shiniest golf clubs who wins the game (Carroll 1980:11).

### REFERENCES

- Carroll, J. B. 1980. *Testing communicative performance*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.  
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